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ABSTRACT

A key element in a research paper writing assignment modified for students of English as a second language to assure their success is teacher control over most of the process. A chronological plan for action for the micro research project includes these steps: creating an awareness of current events and controversial issues, practicing necessary writing skills, choosing a topic, locating sources in the library, making the final selection of articles, reading and analyzing the articles, synthesizing the information, documenting the source material, and writing the paper. The papers are evaluated for content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary, and returned for student revision, with at least an hour of individual student-teacher discussion. Individualization for a more advanced student is accomplished by making the task more complex, varying the source-gathering task, or having the student cover a related but slightly different topic. Students have reacted to the assignment with increased self-confidence and understanding of the research process, and there is little chance for plagiarism or major error to occur. (MSE)

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THE FAIL-SAFE MICRO RESEARCH PAPER

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For several years we assigned traditional research papers in our higher-intermediate level ESL classes at the George Washington University. This traditional approach involved assigning a 6-8 page research paper, with each student choosing a topic of interest to him/her.

Using this approach we received research papers full of problems: frequent incidents of plagiarism, unfocused topics, inappropriate sources and citations, "lost-babes-in-the-woods" library experiences, weak organization, lack of cohesion, poor or absent introductions and conclusions. In addition to these problems there were the expected grammatical inadequacies, creating a headache of correction for the teacher and a nightmare of revision for the student. The students themselves felt that they had worked excessively hard on an assignment that they did not quite understand and that lowered their grades somewhat. Their lasting impression was that research was confusing and frustrating.

Finally, out of the kind of desperation caused by writing the question "Are these your own words?" for the 1000th time in the margin of a student paper, we realized that our approach had to change. Initially, we decided to eliminate the research paper assignment altogether. We soon realized, however, that deletion was not the answer. Most of our students would be mainstreamed into their university courses the very next semester where they would be required to write research papers. We decided then that it was necessary to keep a research component but the teaching method needed re-evaluation. Since the most serious flaw of the traditional approach seemed to be the students' lack of success in producing an acceptable final product, we developed a modified research assignment, a "micro research paper," designed to guarantee success.

The key element of the modified research assignment became this guarantee of success, and the only way the students could achieve success was for the teachers to exercise control over most of the process. What these students really needed was a tour guide, leading them from the plane to the busses to the local sights, someone who knew the rules and regulations of this new country. Their analysis of what they "saw" was their own, but without their guide, they were not even getting on the right busses.

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Below, I will present a chronological plan of action for the micro research project. I will also try to offer some suggestions for adaptation of the assignment to individual class needs. There is a great deal of room for flexibility in this unit even though it at first appears to be quite rigid.

CREATING AN AWARENESS OF CURRENT EVENTS AND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

From the beginning of the semester, before even mentioning the existence of the assignment, the teachers try to develop in the students an awareness, an interest if possible, in current events and controversial issues. Several times a week we begin class by discussing what appeared in the news the evening before. We have found that basing a ten or fifteen minute free-write assignment on the discussion is very helpful. Concentrating on current events rather than academic issues has proven to be successful, keeping in mind the reduced scope of the research project.

PRACTICING NECESSARY WRITING SKILLS

Since the micro research paper is actually an extended "Using Authority" exercise, the teachers lead up to it gradually by presenting or reviewing the basic elements of paragraph writing: the topic sentence, supporting sentences, transitional material, outlining, etc. Then, we move on to the elements of essay writing: the thesis statement and introduction, supporting paragraphs, transitional material, concluding paragraph. And the students will have been introduced to the fundamental rhetorical patterns: logical division/chronology/process, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and the possibility of combinations of these patterns. We also cover the basic elements of a "Using Authority" exercise: the structures involved in reported speech, parenthetical documentation of the source material (following MLA guidelines), paraphrasing, summarizing. In terms of grammar we cover adjective and adverb clauses/phrases and nominals.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

After laying this initial foundation, the students should begin reading newspapers and magazines and watching the news on television in preparation for choosing a topic for their research assignment. They may begin by thinking of very broad topics such as drug abuse. The next step would be to narrow that topic to drug abuse among American teen-agers, for example. After having received some guidance in choosing and narrowing topics, all

students hand in their individually-chosen topics. At this point the teacher becomes a recorder, collecting the topics and writing them on the board. The impossible as well as the possible ones are included in order to guide the class to see what makes a topic manageable. A typical list of topics might read as follows:

1. Drug Abuse among American Teenagers
2. Alcohol Abuse among American Teenagers
3. Why (fill in blank) is the Only True Religion
4. Overpopulation in China
5. The Epidemic of Teenage Pregnancy in the U.S.
6. AIDS: God's Punishment for Sin
7. Child Abuse in the U.S.

After reminding the students that the paper will be only about three pages in length, we ask them to identify which topics need to be narrowed even further. The answer should be all of them. We then ask which of the topics are inappropriate for a research paper. The answer should be: the third and sixth topics because they are opinions, not topics for research. After erasing the inappropriate topics, we are left with the remaining areas of interest. At this point the students vote on which area of interest they will all concentrate on. It is almost always clear that there are really only two or three major areas of interest to the class. A lot of friendly but animated discussion goes on here, with students trying to convince others of the values of their own topics. We try to encourage this type of discussion.

It may be necessary to narrow the area ultimately chosen by the students. If, for example, the class has chosen "The Epidemic of Teenage Pregnancy in the U.S.," the teacher's task is to point out that there are many aspects to this epidemic: the causes, the effects on the mother, on the child, on society, the comparison with the teen pregnancy rate in other countries, etc. Another vote is taken on which direction the interest area should take. The new class topic is written on the board; for example, "The Main Causes for the Epidemic of Teenage Pregnancy in the U.S." This is now everyone's topic. Will the students accept the fact that there is only one topic for the entire class? When the reasons for the uniformity of the topic are explained, the students concur.

After the students have chosen the topic, we have found that having them do a ten minute free-write on what they know or assume about the subject is of considerable value, especially in encouraging the less articulate students to participate in preliminary discussions. The students are told at this time to buy a file folder in which to keep all their papers and handouts for this assignment.

LOCATING SOURCES IN THE LIBRARY

The bulk of the next class meeting is spent at the library, looking for magazine and newspaper sources, since these are the most appropriate for current events topics.

At the library the students are divided into groups of two or three; perhaps one group to consult the Washington Post Index, another group the New York Times Index, others various recent editions of The Reader's Guide. We generally experience a bit of controlled chaos at this point. There are many stumbling blocks that the teacher must remove; for example, most of the students will never have used an index or The Reader's Guide before. They will have many questions about the abbreviations in these indexes. They will also want to know if the library has the magazines or journals cited in the Guide.

Occasionally, a class will choose a topic that cannot be researched because sources simply cannot be found in the library. In such a case, it is a worthwhile exercise for the students to see that it will be necessary to change their topic to one that is more researchable.

After approximately 20 or 30 minutes, each group of students should have the bibliographic information for four or five articles in hand. The students must be very careful that they have copied down exact information from the indexes and that they keep this information intact for future use.

Frequently, students choose sources that are not appropriate for their project. An article may not directly relate to the subject (titles can be misleading) or may be out of date. Careful explanation of why these articles are not appropriate is necessary. For example, following our topic on the reasons for the epidemic of pregnancies among American teenagers, an article entitled "Why the Abortion Rate is So High for D.C. Teens" might not be so relevant whereas the article entitled "Babies Having Babies" would be.

Now the task is to locate and reproduce the articles. Each student must then find and reproduce one article from the group list for the next class period. There should be no duplicates. At our library, perhaps at any library, there are not simple tasks.

There may be students going off in all directions - to the bound periodicals stacks, to the recent acquisitions section, to the microfilm and microfiche area, etc. How is the teacher to remain with each group?

Obviously, the teachers need to divide their time carefully. We occasionally find that graduate students in the class will have had some experience finding sources in their various countries. Although the system might be different, those students can often help with some of the location tasks, like finding bound periodicals in the stacks. If there are no graduate students, the teacher divides his/her time by spending a few minutes with each group, assisting the students with their initial problems; for instance, not knowing that the bound periodicals are arranged in alphabetical order, unfamiliarity with the microfilm and microfiche machines and copiers. Groups using the audio-visual equipment will always need more attention.

We remind each group of students that it is responsible for bringing three or four articles to class the next day, complete with correct bibliographic material, including all of the page numbers for the article, the volume number (if applicable), the complete and correctly spelled author's name, etc. We also remind them that if an article is more than one page long, they must reproduce all of the pages, a frequent, if mystifying, omission of our students.

At some point in the library session, the teacher should leave the students alone to help each other continue and complete their searches. The students gain confidence from doing a manageable segment of the search for sources themselves.

MAKING THE FINAL SELECTION OF ARTICLES

The next class session involves getting feedback from the students as to the problems that they experienced in the library and also entails collecting the articles. It is the teacher's responsibility to reproduce all of the relevant articles for the next class period, including their pertinent bibliographic material. Some of their choices of sources might be too long or too technical; for example, an article from a medical journal on difficulties in pregnancy for teenagers would not be comprehensible to a class doing a paper on teen pregnancy. If an article is obviously not appropriate, it is not duplicated for the class. If, however, some articles are merely better written or contain more organized or more complete information than others, we duplicate both the best and the mediocre articles so that the students can see what is involved in a value judgment. We try to keep the longer first list of articles to no more than about eight or nine. If we try to use more, the project becomes primarily a reading assignment, and we run into serious time problems.

READING AND ANALYZING THE ARTICLES

The teacher distributes the package of articles at the next class session and begins the next phase of the project: reading and analysis.

There are many options for the teacher at this time. One is to assign all the articles as homework assignments, perhaps spreading them out over two or three sessions. A second is to read the articles in class as a speed reading exercise. Another might be to have the students present oral summaries of the articles. A combination of these options can be used. All of the articles are discussed in class. Lists of questions on content may be helpful for the first few articles; afterward, as the students become more confident in their comprehension of the material, the class can begin discussing quality - Which article is clearer? Which one is most informative? Which one contains misleading statistics?

As the students read the articles, they are asked to circle any vocabulary or questionable statements and to underline the sections that they find the most helpful or think that they should quote. The whole class then comes to a decision on which sections are the most quotable for the paper. Because of the reduced scope of this paper, formal notetaking and the use of notecards are not covered.

SYNTHESIZING THE INFORMATION

The next phase is synthesis. It is always reassuring to the students to note that they have already finished the most difficult part of their task, choosing and narrowing a subject and finding, reading and analyzing sources. At this point the class writes a thesis statement. This task is done together on the blackboard, with revision, correction, feedback and further revision, until it is the thesis statement that satisfies the group. The teacher can help smooth rough edges and guide the class so that statements such as "I will write about why American teenagers get pregnant" or "Why should high developed country with technology like U.S. have too much pregnancy that can be stopped?" can become a statement such as "This paper will discuss the main reasons for the epidemic rate of pregnancy among American teenagers."

Then the students prepare a working outline of the paper, including the thesis statement. The outlines are collected, corrected, and the best one(s) duplicated. A working outline is very helpful, especially if the students know that it is not sacrosanct, that it might even change a bit as they progress.

DOCUMENTING THE SOURCE MATERIAL

The students are now ready for an explanation of bibliography and parenthetical documentation writing. Following new MLA style, the class practices inserting necessary documentation of the source into the body of the paper, not in a footnote. However, information on footnote and endnote style is also provided, assuming that some teachers will still insist on the more elaborate form.

With this documentation mechanism in hand, they practice composing one or more sentences using quotes from our "core" articles. They quote directly, placing the introductory information at the beginning, at the middle, at the end of the citation, and even between two consecutive quotes from the same source. Then they practice writing a paraphrase and summary of the same material. The students are responsible for using a variety of these techniques; using all direct quotations or all paraphrases is unacceptable.

After reviewing the correct bibliographic format once more, the students are expected to be able to produce a bibliography for the following class session. The teachers collect, correct and return the bibliographies as soon as possible, perhaps the same day they are handed in if there is enough time.

The teachers also review other elements of writing the paper needed for the formal composing activity; namely, how to construct a title page (following the guidelines of their particular institution); what kinds of transitional signals are appropriate for certain types of situations; what kinds of conclusions are effective in research paper writing. Slower classes might need to prepare concluding statements as a class. The more able students would rather be allowed some latitude for their own comments and creativity in the conclusion.

WRITING THE PAPER

The students are now ready for the formal composing of the paper. They begin writing it in class, in a writing-lab type of setting, with the teacher circulating among the students. They are instructed to bring the following items to class that day: English/English dictionary, blank, lined paper, outline for the paper, bibliography, Thesaurus (optional).

Then they finish the paper as an out-of-class assignment. They are instructed that the final product should consist of: title page, outline with thesis statement, body (paginated), and bibliography.

EVALUATING THE PAPER

The students' papers are evaluated for content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary. The papers are returned to be revised. The teachers try to provide at least one hour of a one-on-one feedback session to clear up any problems for the students. The revisions, along with the originals, are handed in and re-evaluated by the teacher and a final grade is given.

Is there any creativity in this type of writing? Is there too much control? It is amazing how much variety occurs in these papers. No two students think alike and no paper is ever very much like another student's. An analogy might be drawn to an art class where everyone is provided with the same materials and the same model, but no two pieces of art are the same. What the teacher has done is to remove almost any chance of error from the process. We guide the students in every step of the research process so that the following semester, when they have instructors who cannot give the students this type of intensive assistance, they will have the confidence to do research and hand in papers that will not be detrimental to their academic progress.

A review of the controlled elements of this research paper can be found below:

1. Choice of topic
2. Location and choice of sources
3. Identification of material to be extracted from sources
4. Title page
5. Outline
6. Thesis statement
7. (Conclusion)*
8. Parenthetical documentation of sources (or footnoting/endnoting)
9. (Transitional material)*
10. Bibliography

* These elements are controlled to a lesser degree.

INDIVIDUALIZING THE PROCESS

We might consider how this project can be individualized for certain situations. Individualization can be achieved in many ways. For example, graduate students might be asked to choose more articles, or longer ones. Or they might be asked to call a government agency to ask for information on the sub-

ject. Located in Washington, D.C., our program takes advantage of this convenience every semester. The Department of Health and Human Services is a favorite source of information for our students. And, as mentioned before, we ask the graduate students to help the undergraduates locate sources during the library session.

Still another variation on source gathering is to have the students interview someone about their subject. Interviews are not always possible, but they are usually worthwhile. Although it would be too uncomfortable to interview a pregnant teenager for the paper on teen pregnancy, it might be possible to interview someone from the Sociology Department who is studying this problem or perhaps working with pregnant teens.

Another way to individualize might be to allow graduate students or others who do not seem to be needing quite so much guidance to choose a topic related to, but not exactly the same as, the class topic. Instead of causes of the teen pregnancy epidemic, for example, they might want to do the effects on society. Their papers might also be a bit longer, perhaps five pages.

STUDENT REACTIONS

The feedback that we have gotten from the students in our program about the project is almost always positive. The inexperienced undergraduate students feel that they could successfully complete research assignments in their courses the next semester. They did not feel that way before undertaking the project. The graduate students have said that, although the process of finding sources may be only technically different from the process in their countries, the style of organizing the paper and incorporating sources is different enough to make the assignment of great value to them. And the teachers feel that they have finally been able to guide their classes through the dangerous side streets of the research process without losing even one tourist. There is no chance for error. There is virtually no occurrence of plagiarism. There is only the possibility of a successful and safe trip for all.

THE AUTHOR

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